The New York Times

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW; You Don't Need a Weatherman; Just Point Your Camera and Shoot, Man

By VICKI GOLDBERG
Published: December 22, 2000

Occasionally a photographer comes along who is a kind of human barometer, registering pressure changes, ticking off fluctuations in the cultural weather. Photojournalists would like to be like this and occasionally are, but they are often hemmed in by the need to pay too much attention to events or by the restrictions of assignment editors and publications.

Garry Winogrand's work has that barometric look. He was an inelegant barometer to be sure, not your polished wood and gilt instrument but a beat-up, eccentric number that was nonetheless uncannily accurate about the nature of the atmosphere in the 1960's and early 70's. Winogrand (1928-1984) recognized, somewhere in his bones, that the times they were a-changin'. He was a kind of weatherman with a camera, exploding photographic conventions and trying to replace them, not with a utopia, not with a better world or even a better-looking one, but with his own version of the way it already was.

"Garry Winogrand: Mostly New York," the Pace/MacGill Gallery's show of 61 photographs, is the first New York exhibition of his work since a 1988 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. It's a bit of mini-retrospective in itself, with examples from Winogrand's major bodies of work: the zoo, public events (including art openings), women, a stock show in Texas, life on the streets of New York and in airports and on the road across the country.

Winogrand's zoo pictures, early in his social exploration, are funny and quietly, triumphantly sardonic, with people and animals in an uncertain contest for dominance, wisdom and relevance. "The Judge" is a portrait of a baboon sitting in sartorial splendor; he wears what appears to be a great feathered cloak and leggings and displays his genitals with the self-assurance of the well dressed. In a half-tilted image, three people bend at right angles to study a walrus that prefers to study us. Elsewhere a woman in a fetchingly skirted bathing suit is viewed from under the water, swimming with a pig.

When it came to women, Winogrand was dazzled; knocked out by young ones of many descriptions, perpetually hungering after them like some kind of hard hat whistling through his viewfinder. On the other hand, in a Texas stock show he could make a clown running from a bull in a vast, dim arena look like a parable of life on a lonely planet. On the street, he had an unerring eye for isolation in a crowd, and he could turn the insufficiencies of camera vision, the blurs of light seen too fast, the impressionist haze of imperfectly focused backgrounds, into acceptable shorthand for sight.

His observations of the effect of the media on events veered from Edmund Muskie in a vortex of supporters that was punctuated by ravening cameras to John Szarkowski (then director of the department of photography at the Modern) blissfully contemplating his own perfect smoke ring as it hovered before a geometric painting. Winogrand had a wry take on the phenomenon: in a photograph of a line of people viewed from behind as they eagerly crane upward to watch Apollo 11 lifting into the sky, one woman turns around to photograph Winogrand photographing her.

Make no mistake about it: the virtues of Winogrand's work can be hard to find. It can look hopelessly amateurish or mystifyingly unresolved. He appears to have, he must have worked largely on intuition, photographing, as he famously said, to see what a thing looked like in a photograph. The photographer's own editorial process takes on a heightened importance under these circumstances, and it can be hard to figure out just what Winogrand saw in certain images. On the other hand, he could get it all down with precarious finality or stamp it with his own brand of unlikely equilibrium.

He shot first and asked questions later. Pushing the limits of sight, camera vision and coherence, he would tilt his camera or come in too close, thus guaranteeing a world off balance, with skewed perspectives. Shooting rapidly in the very center of flux, he could not have seen all the elements in some of his more complex compositions, but he relied on his intuition, which must have been in some sort of holy alliance with the possibilities of the 35-millimeter camera. Of course there was always the next frame, and the next, if he wasn't certain he had it right.

His street work had a new rhythm, everyone dancing jerkily and all alone on the sidewalk, the entire field of vision stage-managed by a reprobate choreographer, as if even on the streets people were doing the twist. Winogrand was wired, transmitting electric currents of energy (and noting the short circuits).

He catches the erratic pulse, the jazzy rhythms, the crazy energy of the 1960's in a way that seems haphazard, in a style that often appears entirely undisciplined, in images that sometimes barely hold together. All of which might be said of the decade itself. Perhaps he was practicing a kind of visual onomatopoeia.

In the second half of the 1950's, he had seen Robert Frank's work and immediately recognized the new borders of a photographic territory. Frank, William Klein and several other photographers in the United States challenged not only the value of perfect clarity and technique that ruled among photographers, but also certain assumptions about life in general, assumptions that a world war had thrown into question.

For years, photographers, like the rest of society, had operated on the underlying assumption that the world was stable and comprehensible, ordered, trustworthy, solid and enduring. No matter how troubling the subject, photography by groups like the Farm Security Administration and the Photo League, and the photojournalism in Life and Look and other magazines in the 1930's, 40's and 50's generally, observed the basic rules of precision, strict observance of perspective, and firmly grounded, mostly centralized compositions. This was an unconsciously reassuring propaganda for the myth of general stability.

A lot of myths tended to fall apart after World War II, and photographers expressed the disorder in the mid-50's before many were prepared to acknowledge it. Frank and Klein were pessimistic about the American notion of contentment from sea to shining sea, and they were impatient with the style that had proclaimed it in the magazines.

Winogrand took what Frank had to offer him -- the disregard for rules, the wide-angle lens as a means to both inclusiveness and complexity, the rough-and-readiness of approach, the embrace of instability and fragmentation, the trust in the unconscious to winnow an insignificant scene for a kernel of significance -- and put his own stamp on it. What he made was either peculiarly American (Frank grew up in Switzerland) or specifically of the 60's, or perhaps both.

Winogrand may not have been entirely pessimistic, but he operated on the edge of despair. When he applied for his first Guggenheim Fellowship in 1963, he wrote: "Our aspirations and successes have been cheap and petty. I read the newspapers, the columnists, some books, I look at the magazines (our press). They all deal in illusions and fantasies. I can only conclude that we have lost ourselves, and that the bomb may finish the job permanently, and it just doesn't matter, we have not loved life. I cannot accept my conclusions, so I must continue this photographic investigation further and deeper."

His photographs do not often reach this level of gloom. They are not exactly happy or satisfied and are more likely to be quite dubious about the prospects of improvement, yet they evince intense curiosity, gratitude for discoveries, even if not particularly promising ones, and plenty of humor. In fact, there is a kind of mordant optimism that keeps breaking through. The world is a pretty funny place after all, and we might as well make hay while the sun shines.

Perhaps photography itself saved the photographer. Perhaps the camera kept his demons at bay.

"Garry Winogrand: Mostly New York" is at the Pace/MacGill Gallery, 32 East 57th Street, Manhattan, (212) 759-7999, through Jan. 6.

Photo: A large detail from Garry Winogrand's "Apollo 11 Moon Shot" (1969). (Pace/MacGill gallery)